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MIRABEAU BUONAPARTE LAMAR

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CHAPTER VI

CLOSING YEARS

When President Houston's first administration closed in December, 1838, it was well known that he would be a candidate to succeed Lamar in 1841. He entered Congress in October, 1839, and immediately became the spokesman for those opposed to Lamar, and succeeded fairly well in creating an anti-administration party in Congress. He denounced Lamar on every occasion, but Lamar usually contented himself with defending his administration against attack. He took no active part in the campaign in 1841, though it was generally understood that he favored the election of the vice-president, David G. Burnet, who was running against Houston. It cannot be said that there was anything like definite party lines in the contest, and the election of Houston by an overwhelming majority did not indicate a complete repudiation of Lamar. Burnet was unpopular, and his brief tenure of the office of president during Lamar's illness did not make him any more popular. Besides, Houston understood thoroughly the turbulent frontier methods of campaigning, and his status at that time as a military hero was unquestioned.

That Lamar's popularity had declined, however, particularly with Congress, cannot be denied. At the beginning of his administration he had an overwhelming majority of both Houses with him, while at its close the House of Representatives was hostile, and the Senate showed only a small majority in support of his policies. But Houston had been less popular at the close of his first administration. The unpopularity of both executives was natural in a frontier state where each man was largely an individualist and inclined to resist any measure of governmental control. The main acts and failures of the Lamar administration I have already recorded. His attitude toward annexation, his Indian policy, the Santa Fé expedition, all aroused some opposition; but the total failure of the financial system during his administration probably caused more discontent than all the other

matters put together. For the better part of his term he was in bad health, and this contributed to a certain personal unpopularity. This led to a certain detachment from or coldness toward his friends. "I am informed," wrote Memucan Hunt,

that you are cold and repulsive in manners, &c. I plead the constant occupancy of your mind on important matters of State and the impossibility of those courtesies which were to be looked for when your mind is thus engrossed &c, &c. It is however very little trouble to ask a man when he reached the city, &c, &c, &c, &c, and I will take the liberty of recommending to you to tax yourself in this respect.¹

He did not engage in the usual tricks of the politician, and for this he deserves both praise and blame. He is to be praised for depending on the justice of his policies rather than on political movements to bring their success; but if he could have added to that method a little of the political tact applied with success even today, he would have been more successful, and probably would have stood higher among historians.

His administration came to a close in December, 1841, and he retired to his home in Richmond. In the summer of 1842 he visited Georgia and was received with considerable honor. He was elected to the Phi Gamma Society of Emory College at Covington, Georgia, and made addresses at Columbus, Macon, and other places.² He returned to Texas in the spring of 1843, and except for a request that James Webb become a candidate for president in 1844, he took no part in politics. The documents included among his papers indicate that he was busy collecting material for his long-planned history of Texas, an occupation which engaged him from this time on, though he never put his material together. In 1844 he became convinced that separate statehood for Texas was impracticable and he advocated annexation. When annexation was accomplished some of his friends urged him to become a candidate for the United States Senate,³ but he declined, and Houston and Thomas J. Rusk were elected.

When the Mexican War began Lamar attached himself to the Texas Mounted Volunteers, and participated in the battle of Mon-

¹Hunt to Lamar, June 5, 1839, *Lamar Papers*, No. 1322.

²*Lamar Papers*, No. 2146.

³*Lamar Papers*, No. 2192.

terey. The Texas troops were under the command of Governor J. Pinckney Henderson, and Lamar acted as division inspector, and also as adjutant. He was highly commended by General Henderson in his report to General Taylor on the battle. General Henderson wrote:

General Lamar, my division inspector, (acting also as adjutant,) was mainly instrumental in causing my troops to be called into requisition. He had accompanied General Quitman in the occupancy of a point in the lower part of the city, where the battle commenced; and it was at his suggestion that a messenger was despatched for my command. He was found in active co-operation with the Mississippi and Tennessee troops; but rejoined my regiment on its arrival, and acted, during the balance of the fight, with the Texans.⁴

Shortly after the battle of Monterey Lamar was placed in command of an independent company and stationed at Laredo for the purpose of holding that post and restraining the Indians from attacking the Texans. He continued in this position until his command was mustered out at the command of General Taylor in September, 1847, though he frequently urged that he be allowed to accompany the main army in case of further fighting. Anticipating General Taylor's order, he requested and obtained of the Texan Government the authority either to re-enlist his company or raise a new company to be stationed at Laredo to continue the work already undertaken, and it was not until June, 1848, after the definite treaty of peace had been signed, that he mustered out his command and retired permanently from military service.⁵

As soon as the Texan authorities had taken possession of the disputed territory between Nueces and Rio Grande, they proceeded to organize it as a part of the State of Texas. Lamar himself, as commandant at Laredo, on July 3, 1847, called an election for local officers at that place. The counties of San Patricio and Nueces were organized by the Texas Government, and took part in the election of state and county officers for the year 1847. Lamar became a candidate for the House of Representatives from those two counties, and on November 1 was elected without oppo-

⁴*House Executive Document No. 4, 29 Cong., 2 Sess., p. 98.*

⁵For this paragraph see *Lamar Papers*, Nos. 2297-2390.

sition. He served in the session of 1847-1848, while his company was being re-enlisted and reorganized. He was proposed for speaker of the House, but was defeated by J. W. Henderson of Harris county by a vote of 34 to 24. He was chairman of the committee on State Affairs, but took little part in the activities of the House; and as soon as the session was over, he returned to his command in Laredo, where he staid until June, 1848.

From this time until 1857 the records of his movements are scanty. In the summer of 1849 he went again to Georgia on business connected with the eleven-league grant of land to a Georgia company, the business which had taken him to Texas in 1835 and 1836. He remained in Georgia until April, 1851, when he returned to Texas. There he married Miss Henrietta Moffitt of Galveston, after having remained unmarried since the death of his first wife in 1835. While in Georgia he contributed his opinion to the great questions of the time in public addresses and newspaper articles.

On August 1, 1850, a group of Macon citizens wrote a letter requesting that Lamar address a public mass meeting to be held in Macon on Clay's Compromise. Declining their invitation, August 16, he wrote that he was opposed to the Clay Compromise, but also to the Missouri Compromise; he was for all the rights of the South, and opposed to all compromises save those of the Constitution. Clay's and the Missouri Compromise were only capitulations on the part of the South, for if Congress could prohibit slavery north of thirty-six thirty, it could prevent it south of that line. "Naturally connected with these matters," he continued,

is the present position of the affairs of Texas. It forms the most practical issue of the day. I look upon the Santa Fé country as forming the first battle-field between the assailants and defenders of the institutions of the South. The Free Soilers are determined to seize the territory for the purpose of abolishing slavery upon it. It is now lawfully a part of Texas, and subject to the dominion of her institutions. If it can be severed, and united with New Mexico, Abolition will accomplish its ultimate purpose at once within the legitimate limits of a sovereign state.

The title of Texas to the territory in question is indisputable. It was within her designated limits while she was an independent government. She held to the Rio Bravo, by the same right by

which she held to the Sabine. When she was admitted into the Union, these boundaries were well defined, and recognized by Congress; and it was out of this very Santa Fé country, that the new states were expected to be formed, which are alluded to in the resolutions of annexation.

He went on to say that it was a violation of that territory by Mexico which had resulted in a declaration of war by the United States, and said that the only remedy for the South was secession. "This is the only course for the South," he said.

There is no safety in the Union as it now exists. It is not the Union of the Constitution—not the Union established by the Sages of the Revolution; not the one that 'ensures domestic peace and tranquility;'—but another great dynasty erected on its ruins—a Russian Empire, which makes a Hungary of the South.

He advised a convention of the Southern States, fully empowered by the State sovereignties, to meet as speedily as possible upon the adjournment of Congress, to organize a Southern Confederacy in case the measures of the abolitionists were adopted. He doubted whether or not the Union could continue, but thought that if the South should withdraw, the North would come to terms; however, he thought the South was too divided to secede. Thus he placed himself among the extremists of the South, which was not strange when we recall his earlier alignment in the Indian and tariff controversies of the Jackson period.⁶

He continued to collect historical material, which he began to organize, and even had one chapter of a work on Long's expedition printed. No record of public activity remains, however, until January, 1855, when he became president of the Southern Commercial Convention held in New Orleans at that time, retiring before the close of the session on account of ill health.⁷ In 1857 began his diplomatic career, which I shall discuss in some detail.

At the outset of the Buchanan administration Lamar became an applicant for a diplomatic post, which he considered as justified on account of his record as a States' Rights Democrat, and because his nephew, Howell Cobb, was secretary of the treasury.

⁶*Lamar Papers*, No. 2461; *Columbus Times*, September 10, 1850.

⁷*Lamar Papers*, No. 2489.

It seems that from the beginning Lamar desired an appointment to Nicaragua.⁸ On March 6, 1857, Senator Rusk of Texas and J. A. Quitman of Mississippi sent a joint letter to Henry A. Wise, Governor of Virginia, asking for his influence to secure the appointment of Lamar as "resident minister to some of the European or South American Republics," and stating that he would accept a position as governor of a territory. Lamar was recommended as having been devoted to democratic principles throughout a long life, stating that he was induced to make application for such an appointment on account of pecuniary distress.⁹ On March 8 Lamar applied in person to President Buchanan, and shortly after it was determined to appoint him as minister to the Argentine Confederation. The formal announcement of the appointment came in a letter from Lewis Cass, secretary of state, on July 23, 1857.¹⁰ Lamar was delayed in setting out on his mission on account of financial difficulties, and when he was about to start, Cass and Buchanan decided to send him to the Central American republics, Nicaragua and Costa Rico as minister plenipotentiary.

In the absence of documentary evidence I am unable to state the cause for this change, but the cause seems reasonably clear. On November 16, 1857, Cass and Yrissari, the minister of several of the Central American States had signed a treaty which was expected to settle all questions between the United States and Nicaragua, and as Lamar had asked for the Nicaraguan post in the beginning, and had been given another one because Nicaragua was still unrecognized, the natural thing to do was to change his commission and send him to Nicaragua for the purpose of securing the ratification of the treaty.

I shall not be able to discuss in this paper the details of the conditions in Nicaragua out of which this treaty developed, nor the connection of Lamar with the negotiations; but I shall briefly outline the conditions as they were in order to show the superhuman task undertaken by Lamar. On August 27, 1849, a contract was entered into between the Nicaragua Government and the American Atlantic and Pacific Ship Company, by which in return

⁸See McLeod to Green, February 25, 1857, *Lamar Papers*, No. 2510.

⁹Rusk and Quitman to Wise, March 6, 1857, *Lamar Papers* (draft), No. 2511.

¹⁰Cass to Lamar, July 23, 1857, *Lamar Papers*, No. 2522.

for a certain sum of money paid by the company, the company was granted exclusive right to operate the Lake and overland transit from the Atlantic to the Pacific.¹¹ On August 14, 1851, the contract was amended, the company thereafter styling itself the Accessory Transit Company, though no vital changes were made in the charter. This charter was annulled on February 18, 1856, by a decree of the revolutionary government, because, as it was claimed, the company had failed to carry out the terms of the agreement.¹²

The Walker filibustering expedition, which began in 1855, had come to a close with the expulsion of Walker on May 1, 1857; but the expulsion of Walker did not mean that a stable government would be established any more than that there had been a stable government before he went to Nicaragua. The United States had refused to recognize the Walker government, and the government set up after Walker's expulsion was unable to secure recognition at once. But as the new government failed to restore the ships of the Accessory Transit Company, or to open the transit for any other company, the United States thought it time to take a hand in the matter. Hence Yrissari, who had been minister for several of the Central American republics for a number of years, and had recently been appointed minister for Nicaragua, was received officially on November 16, 1857, for the purpose of signing the treaty mentioned above. This treaty, which probably had been discussed by Cass and Yrissari before this date, provided for the guarantee of the transit route by the United States for the benefit of all nations. The provision was that the United States be authorized to employ troops for the purpose of keeping the transit route open in case Nicaragua should fail. Besides this, there was the usual agreements as to commerce.¹³ This was the treaty that Lamar was expected to secure the ratification of by Nicaragua.

Lamar arrived in Nicaragua and spent a little more than a year there in fruitless efforts to secure the ratification of the treaty. The contrary interests of three transit companies that claimed exclusive rights on the isthmus, the interests of Great Britain and

¹¹*Senate Document* No. 194, 47 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 49.

¹²*Ibid.*, 88.

¹³*Ibid.*, 117-125.

France, and the natural unwillingness of the General Americans to deal fairly or openly, prevented the accomplishment of his objects. He arrived less than a year after Walker was driven from Nicaragua, and just a short time after his arrest on his second attempt to revolutionize that republic; hence, his reception was not cordial, and he was never able to secure the confidence of any of the officials. The President went so far as to accuse Lamar of being involved with the filibusters, and of having made threats that unless the treaty should be ratified a new filibuster expedition under the auspices of the United States Government would take place; but he was afterwards forced to retract this charge.¹⁴

In July, 1859, having become hopeless of any result from his efforts Lamar applied for a recall, which was granted, and the latter part of that month he was back in Washington, having drawn up a treaty which he thought might have proved acceptable to the United States Government, but which was never approved. He remained in Washington only a short time, and then returned to his home in Richmond, Texas. He was there preparing to enjoy the association of his friends, when he died rather suddenly on December 19, 1859.

¹⁴A complete history of Lamar's experiences in Nicaragua does not come within the purposes of this paper. For the sake of unity I have been compelled to omit the story of his connection with that hotbed of revolution and international rivalries, but I shall in the future publish the result of my investigations in this field of his activities.¹⁵

¹⁵See for this paragraph Senate Documents, 35 Cong., 2 Sess., No. 1, p. 19.